

## Symbolic And Systemic Violence In Anna Burns' Milkman

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### Abstract

Žižek's Violence explores the global representation of violence. He distinguishes subjective and objective violence. Subjective violence is committed by a known actor. There is no obvious objective violence perpetrator. Žižek differentiates between symbolic (language-based) and systemic (systemic, sustained by capitalism, political, and economic structures) violence. This paper focuses on the application of Žižek's theory of symbolic and systemic violence to the text of Anna Burns' novel, Milkman.

Keywords: Violence, Symbolic, Milkman, Mediation and Milkman's

### INTRODUCTION

The present discourse endeavours to direct its attention towards the nuanced manifestations of violence as depicted within the literary work entitled Milkman. The present scholarly investigation avails itself of the intellectual contributions put forth by the esteemed philosopher Slavoj Žižek, as well as his insightful elucidation of the psychoanalytic theories propounded by Jacques Lacan. The primary objective of this study is to meticulously scrutinise the nuanced portrayal of violence within the literary work under consideration.

### Žižek's Violence

Understanding violence and how it is portrayed in a global society is the focus of Žižek's Violence. He makes a distinction between subjective and objective violence. Violence committed by a recognised actor of action is subjective violence. (Weiss). There is no obvious perpetrator of objective violence. Žižek distinguishes between two objective types of violence: symbolic violence (violence expressed via language) and violence that is systemic (violence that is sustained by

capitalism, political and economic structures) (Violence 1-2). Poverty is persistent, systemic violence (Violence 20, 37, 38). Žižek contends that our goal is to concentrate on systematic and symbolic violence.

Understanding how politics and public perception interact is made easier with the definitional analysis that Žižek provides for various forms of violence. It prompts us to ask essential and fresh questions about the society in which we reside ("Slavoj Žižek and Violence - Not Even Past"). Furthermore, Žižek argues that objectively violent economic systems can result in subjective violence, such as criminal activity, which can disenfranchise a group of individuals and lead them to fight their circumstances violently. One must remember that humanitarian responses to subjective violence are mediated by cultural, ideological-political, and economic factors rather than dependent on the violence level per se. Žižek used the Time magazine cover story from 2006, which detailed the 4 million deaths in the Congo over the previous ten years, as evidence for his point. However, despite the severity of the humanitarian crisis, the reading public did not react as predicted, and Žižek interprets this lack of response as politically mediated. Mediation assures who is and is not a victim (i.e., 9/11 victims, Muslim women, etc.).

### **Žižek and the Novel Milkman**

The novel, *Milkman*, written by Burns, has a plot of inherent violence. *Milkman* takes place in an unspecified city in Northern Ireland during the 1970s, a period marked by the Troubles. The Irish locals show their unwavering support in the battles. The main character of the book is an 18-year-old woman who is known as "middle sister" among her eleven siblings. She resides in a community with strong Catholic beliefs, which is known for its separatist tendencies (*Milkman* 52). The eldest member of the family, whether they have relocated or departed, still possesses an intriguing aura of enigma. In the story, the "middle sister" is described as someone who attends night courses in the downtown area while still residing with her widowed mother and three younger siblings, affectionately referred to as "ma" (*Milkman* 28) and the "wee sisters" (*Milkman* 20), respectively. While taking a leisurely walk in her neighbourhood, the protagonist encounters a man known as the "milkman" (*Milkman* 1). This intruder, who is in his forties and married, drives up in his car and extends an invitation to take her for a ride (*Milkman* 1, 3). "Middle sister" politely refuses the offer, because she is already

involved in a romantic relationship ("maybe-boyfriend") and has no interest in pursuing a relationship with milkman. Her response is conveyed through the phrases, "I am walking" and "I am reading" (Milkman 1). Despite her attempts to distance herself, milkman continues to pursue her in increasingly disturbing ways. He demonstrates an unsettling knowledge of her daily routine and behaviours when engaging in conversation with her (Milkman 5–6). Eventually, he threatens to falsely accuse her "maybe-boyfriend" of being a state informant, putting his life at risk (Milkman 110). In her relentless pursuit of freedom, the middle sister courageously takes a series of strategic actions to elude her persistent stalker. As rumours of an alleged affair with the milkman begin to circulate within the neighbourhood, the situation quickly spirals out of control for her. Unfortunately, her attempts fail, and a renouncer friend of hers organises an intervention, informing "middle sister" that she is at risk of turning into a social pariah (or "beyond-the-pale") (Milkman 201). The "middle sister" gets poisoned while out with this acquaintance by a mentally unstable lady ("tablets girl") who regularly spikes people's drinks (Milkman 214). After she recovers from her sickness, "middle sister" finds out that "tablets girl" was murdered and that everyone thinks "milkman" killed her on "middle sister's" behalf (Milkman 233).

Additionally, state authorities who mistook the district's legitimate milkman for Milkman shot him (Milkman 247-248). He is now recuperating in a hospital with "ma," who has been secretly in love with him for decades, watching over him (Milkman 248). "Middle sister" goes to visit "maybe-boyfriend" at his home to apologise after a particularly unpleasant phone call (Milkman 245-246). However, while there, she learns that "maybe-boyfriend" is having an illicit romance with his closest friend ("chef") (Milkman 293). She starts to go home, shocked, and dejected, only to have Milkman approach her again (Milkman 297). Finally, "middle sister" feels forced to enter his vehicle and hears him promise to pick her up for a date the next night (Milkman 299-300). The "middle sister" hears the next day that state soldiers have slain Milkman (Milkman 301). She enters a club feeling relieved when she is accosted by "Somebody McSomebody," a young guy who continually ignores her rejections (Milkman 306). Fortunately, the incident takes place in the women's toilet; "middle sister" is rescued by the appearance of a group of women who beat up "Somebody McSomebody" (Milkman 309-310). As the book concludes, "middle sister's" life resumes

(Milkman 315-316). She finds it amusing as she heads out for a run as the streets are crowded with young girls—"wee sisters" included—dressed up and impersonating the mother of her "possible lover," an internationally renowned ballroom dancer (Milkman 316).

### **Interpretation of Milkman with Žižekian Theory**

Žižek has a unique way of approaching every issue. For instance, when he comments about violence, he aims to look at violence differently. Usually, violence is linked to a perpetrator – a murderer, terrorist, and rioter. Žižek calls this subjective violence because we can identify the subject ("Old, New and Violence | Forever Under Construction"). However, according to him, two other kinds of violence are often hidden because no one can readily be held responsible for them. This objective violence comes in two forms: symbolic and systemic. Symbolic violence comes into our languages, such as terrorism and justice. Systemic violence is what lies underneath it all (Kleinschmidt). This is ideology, our implicit rules which guide us. This systemic violence might be subjectively invisible, but it is very real (Žižek, Ticklish 38).

Žižek says that violence manifests through the Symbolic Order language. All these are ideologically formulated. Hitler considered the Jews the Other, and his theory of "Eugenics" killed the Jews for unknown reasons. The Holocaust, an event that happened in the long past, has to be represented in the narrative memory. A memory of the Holocaust evokes traumatic disorders in the survivors. So, to have a clear representation of the Holocaust, the spectators also should experience the trauma. It is here that Burns' novel, *Milkman*, stands out: "Also, in a district that thrived on suspicion, supposition and imprecision, where everything was so back-to-front it was impossible to tell a story properly, or not tell it but just remain quiet, nothing could get said here or not said but it was turned into gospel" (Milkman 229)

Žižek has significantly contributed to popularising the specific kind of psychoanalysis used by Lacan (Myers 20). (Myers 20). Three Orders (or cognitive dimensions) are central to Lacan's thought: The imaginary, The Symbolic and The Real. First, "Imaginary" refers to how the ego is constructed and born. (Myers 21).

The Symbolic is the most ambitious Order since it has jurisdiction over everything from language to law and all social institutions (Myers 22). The Symbolic makes up a significant portion of what we call "rea

lity" (Myers 22). Reality is presented before us through the Symbolic Order. According to Lacan, the Symbolic Order also has a way of imprisoning us. We are linked by the law of the signifier, which he refers to as the chain of signification. As a result, we can only approach something by way of their signifier's unstable and arbitrary law. As a result, we are destined to spend our whole lives in the "prison house of language," never knowing "the world as it is." (Myers 24).

According to the Order of the Real, these aspects of existence cannot be known. All our knowledge of the world is mediated by language ("Slavoj Žižek" Silo Pub). We never learn anything directly ("Slavoj Žižek" [Silo Pub]). The Real, in this sense, is the world before language broke it into pieces ("Slavoj Žižek" [Silo Pub]). Lacan argues that the Real resists symbolisation ("Slavoj Žižek" [Silo Pub]). Therefore, The Real is unrepresentable, and The Real has no purpose or reason; it only endures, and the only significant reality is the Symbolic Order.

### **Symbolic and Systemic Violence in Milkman**

In the context of Burns' novel *Milkman*, the community is convinced that the "middle sister" was having an affair with the milkman: "I was being talked about because there was a rumour started by them ... that I had been having an affair with this milkman (*Milkman*1, 53, 116). "Rumours, manufactured truths, and sectarianism are the ingredients that endanger the life of a young and largely defenceless protagonist whose inner voice is silently raised to challenge the divided community" (Morales-Ladrón 266). The narrator explains the community's mindset "within the context of our intricately coiled, overly secretive, hyper-gossipy, puritanical, yet indecent totalitarian district." (172).

In *Milkman*, the rumour-mongering by the townspeople becomes a reality, and they live within that. Maybe-Boyfriend works as a mechanic, and one day, he brings home a car part from a rare and valuable car. People became suspicious of his political leanings, as a part of the car's body had a British flag decal. "Maybe-boyfriend" mainly dispels these ungrounded suspicions, as the decal is not his (*Milkman* 27). When the mentally unstable "tablets girl" was murdered, townspeople suspected the "middle sister" of perpetrating the murder: "It had been Milkman. He had killed her. Ordinarily, not politically, he had killed her, and all because – so it seemed to this community – he hadn't liked that she'd attempted to kill me" (*Milkman* 240).

The book, a first-person narrative of the Troubles, depicts a microcosmic neighbourhood that mirrors the effects of the Troubles on the macrocosm, the nation. Burns' work not only describes the political upheaval but also illuminates the social constructs of the Northern Irish community by addressing topics like discrimination against certain groups, sexual harassment, and moral and political hypocrisy. "Thus, the physical violence the Troubles imposes on Northern Ireland in the 1970s and its outcome echo through the middle sister's survival story in her community, which enforces both physical and psychological violence on her". The book addresses these issues by alternating between the narrator's coming-of-age experiences under community persecution and the continuing social and political disputes. Therefore, Burns' *Milkman* not only depicts the tension during the Troubles through the eyes of a young lady but also exposes the varied ways that violence manifests itself in different social contexts (Danaci 291).

The middle sister, who was already the target of neighbourhood rumours for her habit of "reading while walking," is quickly demonised by the neighbourhood as Milkman's mistress and harassed by her family members without being able to defend herself (Danaci 293).

The effect of violence is made clear throughout the book, even for the apolitical "middle sister," and it is impossible to ignore (Danaci 294): Of course, as regards to living here, a person could not help but have a view. Impossible it would be – in those days, those extreme, awful crowd days, and on those streets too, which were the battlefield which were the streets – to live here and not have a view about it. I myself spent most of my time with my back turned in the nineteenth century, even the eighteenth century, sometimes the seventeenth and sixteenth centuries, yet even then, I couldn't stop having a view (*Milkman* 112).

Despite the protagonist's best efforts, the outside world still touches her despite her attempts to escape it by reading only non-twentieth-century stuff. There is no way to ignore the realities of violence in her culture (Danaci 295). The "middle sister" has an opinion on the disputes despite her pretended apathy and is aware of her status as a citizen of a Republican-dominated district: "... that for us, in our community, on 'our side of the road', the government here was the enemy, and the police here was the enemy, and the government 'over there' was the enemy, and the soldiers from 'over there' were the enemy, and the defender-paramilitaries from 'over the road' were the enemy and, by extension – thanks to suspicion and

history and paranoia – the hospital, the electricity board, the gas board, the water board, the school board, telephone people and anybody wearing a uniform or garments easily to be mistaken for a uniform also were the enemy, and where we were viewed in our turn by our enemies as the enemy – in those dark days, which were the extreme of days, if we hadn't had the renouncers as our underground buffer between us and this overwhelming and combined enemy, who else, in all the world, would we have had? (Milkman 114)

People become paranoid because of the fear created in their lives by both political forces, which prompts them to self-regulate their behaviour and watch out for and police one another to ensure the supposed safety of the community (Danaci 296): "These were knife-edge times, primal times, with everybody suspicious of everybody" (Milkman 27). The protagonist continues to describe the events, "being followed, being spied upon, photographed, misperceived, encircled, anticipated" (Milkman 302). The end outcome is numbness, and the individuals in the community start to become "buried-alive, hundred-per-cent, dulled-to-death, confined people." (Milkman 271)

As Quinn also suggests, "[t]he enemy itself is absent from the story: It only manifests as the click of surveillance cameras. Instead, we watch a community mutilate itself from the inside" (Quinn 9).

The struggle between the middle sister and her community is where this practice of violence is most visibly shown, showing how oppression in the form of psychological violence imposes norms, punishes, and progressively isolates the person (Danaci 298). However, the society depicted in Milkman might be somewhat topsy-turvy because it presents a community where normal is abnormal and abnormal is normal (Danaci 298). Since the "middle sister's" abnormal "reading-while-walking" is unacceptable, the community attempts to "fix" her by understanding what is normal. While the "tablets girl's" wandering around and poisoning people is tolerated, "the middle sister's" habit of "reading-while-walking" is strictly judged by the people and discouraged by her family:

. . . menace that she ["tablets girl"] was, in that different time, during that different consciousness, and with all that other approach to life and death and custom, she was tolerated, just as the weather was tolerated, just as an Act of God or those Friday night armies coming in had to be tolerated. Declaring

her a beyond-the-pale seemed as far as we, the community, could go (Milkman 218).

Even the third brother-in-law, who is portrayed as a highly feminist figure and consequently labelled by society as a "beyond-the-pale", thinks reading-while-walking is strange and off-putting (Danaci298-299):

you should not do that, that it's not safe, not natural, not dutiful to self, that by doing so you're switching yourself off, you're abandoning yourself, that you might as well betake yourself for a stroll amongst the lions and the tigers ... that you might as well be walking with your hands in your pockets (Milkman 58).

The third brother-in-law describes how society views the middle sister's habit, which is as unusual as walking among lions and tigers, even though an outsider character is also regarded as abnormal by the community's standards (Danaci 299).

According to the same criteria, her habit of reading-while-walking is more hazardous, strange, and intolerable than the "milkman's" harassment or his carrying explosives because they both threaten public safety. At the same time, what she reads "fits in" (Milkman 201):

Are you saying it's okay for him to go around with Semtex but not okay for me to read Jane Eyre in public? . . . 'Semtex isn't unusual,' she said. 'It's not not to be expected.'" (Milkman 200-201).

However, the middle sister resists the community's oppression until the "milkman" openly threatens to kill her "maybe-boyfriend". The book's character, "Milkman", symbolises society's overall perception of threat. The horror of the Troubles, abuse of power, and patriarchy in Northern Irish society are all embodied in him. He invokes a threat that functions similarly to what the state forces do. Even though it is stated that he is a killer, the protagonist is affected by him psychologically rather than physically (Danaci 299). The "middle sister's" existence in society is threatened by the presence or absence of "milkman," who meddles with her mental state without engaging in any visible acts of violence. This causes her to become isolated and paranoid. Having grown up in a highly patriarchal society, "middle sister" is unable to identify the abuse of the "milkman." (Danaci 299).

Her inability to recognise sexual harassment is due to the general lack of concern for the problem in the community. It is noted repeatedly in the book that people frequently blame women for the wrongdoing committed by men. Her mother



and eldest sister accuse the middle sister of seducing the "milkman" as soon as the rumours about the "middle sister" and "milkman" start to circulate in the neighbourhood. The middle sister, however, cannot refute the allegations, just as she could not speak up when her first brother-in-law sexually assaulted her when she was twelve. A sense of learned helplessness results from this apparent childhood trauma because the middle sister does not defend herself or react to the accusations. She justifies her reluctance to discuss Milkman's abuses: "I sensed that this doubt – of myself, of the situation – would be picked up on and would then lead to commenting on my credibility. Even if I were to be heard, people here were unused to words like 'pursuit' and 'stalking,' that is, in terms of sexual pursuit and sexual stalking" (Milkman 182-183). Through gossip, such as Milkman's stalking and the state's photography, the community attempts to control her, upsets her mental equilibrium, and ultimately banishes her into isolation. As a result, the oppressed are "naturally" ignored or punished in a society where violence is normalised, humanity is forgotten, and morality has been tainted. (Danaci 300)

The novel does an excellent job of capturing the misogynistic attitude of the community toward women, commenting on the issue of women and a feminist group that staged demonstrations for their rights: "The word 'feminist' was beyond-the-pale. The word 'woman' barely escaped 'beyond-the-pale' (Danaci 300). "Put both together, or try unsuccessfully to soften things with another word, a general word, one in disguise such as 'issues' and basically, you've had it" (Milkman 152). These women are referred to as "tablets girl" in this sense. But unlike the "tablets girl," both men and women view them as a serious threat to the community (Danaci 300-1). Everyone in the book shares this fear of standing out or being perceived as different by society, even the protagonist, who is terrified of being called "beyond-the-pale," avoids talking about women or downplays the fact that her father was raped as a child (Danaci 301).

A further manifestation of violence is groupthink, a technology of power that supports rumours. Because the community has created an alternate reality that serves its purpose of policing others and identifying offenders, the protagonist's mother reacts aggressively. She accuses her of lying when she tells her there is nothing between herself and Milkman. She thus finds herself in a precarious situation where she is both the victim of a rumour that covers up sexual

harassment and the source of admiration and fear among the local women due to her association with a strong paramilitary man (Morales-Ladrón 268).

The way people are nowadays exposed to the outside world, revealing their identities to an unknown realm, and engaging in intimate interactions with unfamiliar others, is part of a knowledge-power society whose infinite webs of interconnection indicate how control is exercised in contemporary society. Milkman has successfully raised all these issues while staging the Northern Irish Troubles as the backdrop of a more global scenario (Morales-Ladrón 274).

The protagonist's refusal to use character names and her reading-while-walking demonstrates her desire to stay away from political issues (quite literally burying her head in a book to emancipate from the reality of The Troubles). The novel is not solely about The Troubles, which Anna Burns attempts to convey through her writing. However, it is the global phenomenon of social and political violence that all people experience.

### **CONCLUSION**

Sceptics may enquire whether there is any difference between Lacanian theory and Žižekian theory. Žižek applies the theories of Lacan to harsh everyday experiences. Both Burns and Žižek have succeeded in giving abstract symbolic ideologies concrete forms. The "milkman" himself and the close-knit society seem to be a tangible manifestation of abstract symbolic ideologies. Unrepresentable horrors and trauma get represented here. Thus, the novel becomes a narrative site where psychoanalytic notions of Lacan and Žižek are deftly manifested. The theory comes alive in the fictional world of Milkman.

Even though Milkman is set in the 1970s, the novel speaks about the present with the author cleverly problematising the third millennial world, governed by the dynamics of biopower and more sophisticated panopticon scenarios that include social media and digital surveillance (Morales-Ladrón).

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